



ORDINARY ANGELS

There is a movie currently playing in theaters called ORDINARY ANGELS. I haven't seen the movie, but I believe that the title perfectly describes our organization (in 2 words!) Indeed, we are an organization of ORDINARY people who our clients experience as ANGELS. ... *"She was an angel sent from heaven."*

We didn't plan on starting an Ordinary Angels organization. Our plan was to start a traditional crisis intervention program staffed by mental health professionals. But we soon realized that staffing a 24/7 service with professionals was cost prohibitive. After heated arguments about who would provide our services, (*"We can't use amateurs!"*, said one colleague) we made a major decision which has defined our organization from the beginning... ordinary community members would provide our services, and they would be at the heart of our organization.

We began recruiting these ordinary residents to be TIP volunteers. I remember the first night of our first training academy. The class was filled with people from all walks of life... students, homemakers, secretaries, teachers, construction workers... Interestingly, there wasn't a single mental health professional among them. As I looked out over this "cast of characters" that first night, I wondered, *"Can these ordinary people do the extraordinary work we are asking them to do?"*

It didn't take long for us to realize that these ordinary people were extraordinary helpers. They were reliable, they received positive reviews from first responders, and they had a remarkable ability to enter emotionally fiery situations and return to their daily lives unscathed.

While we had come to realize that our volunteers were effective helpers, we certainly didn't see them as angels. Then we received our first "angel letter." This letter was the first time a client referred to a volunteer as an angel. Initially, I thought this letter was a "one off." But the "angel letters" kept on coming. They contained phrases like ...

- *"She was an angel... Heaven sent."*
- *"She was an angel. She just appeared by my side. I don't know how she got there."*
- *"He was an angel. We couldn't have gotten through the day without him."*
- *"She was an angel. She didn't say anything, but we could feel her love."*

We were amazed and mystified as we read these letters. Why were our clients describing our "ordinary" volunteers as angels? Our clients weren't prompted by anyone or anything to use the word angel. Volunteers didn't have "angel" on their name tags, nor were they introduced as angels when they arrived on crisis scenes. I would have expected clients, in their thank you letters, to refer to our volunteers either by their names (John/Mary), or by "volunteer" or by "counselor." But no, our clients almost to the person, used the word angel to refer to our volunteers.

It's taken me awhile to realize what our clients have known all along... our volunteers become angels with amazing helping abilities when they respond to TIP calls. They function way beyond what we would expect of volunteer helpers (or professional mental health professionals, for that matter.) They fearlessly enter volatile situations, and despite the confusion and emotional intensity they find there, they know exactly what to say and do.

I have enjoyed many aspects of my TIP career. But what has really awed me, mystified me, and uplifted me has been watching ordinary human beings suddenly become angels with extraordinary helping powers when called into service as TIP volunteers. And when their services as angels are no longer needed, they quietly and humbly go back to their ordinary lives. ORDINARY ANGELS, indeed!!

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